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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: DEFENSE MINISTER SIKHARULIDZE MEETS A/S
GORDON

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. On June 10, Defense Minister Sikharulidze and EUR Assistant Secretary Gordon discussed the state of the Georgian military, progress on reform, NATO prospects, bilateral cooperation, the Geneva process, and UNOMIG negotiations. Sikharulidze made clear that Russia poses a bigger threat than ever, with an ever-expanding military presence in the regions, and Georgia was orienting its restructuring efforts to defend against that threat, even while downsizing. He sought more clarity on the way forward for NATO membership and hoped for more bilateral cooperation with NATO allies, explaining that other countries would look to the U.S. as a trendsetter in this regard. A/S Gordon expressed strong support for Georgia's military reform efforts and NATO aspirations, noting that every country has the right to defend itself, and welcomed Georgia's willingness to contribute to the effort in Afghanistan. End summary.

STATE OF THE MILITARY AND REFORM

¶2. (C) Minister Sikharulidze told A/S Gordon about the consolidation of the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) had signed MOUs with the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Internal Affairs to limit military presence near the boundaries, those documents only covered the areas outside the disputed regions; no mechanism existed to control the Russian buildup. He noted the presence of roughly 8,000 Russian troops, 1,500-1,800 border guards, and a steadily increasing military infrastructure including stockpiles of equipment and supply lines, explaining that Russia sought to decrease the time it would take to change from a defensive to an offensive posture. Sikharulidze also noted that Georgia is seeing patterns of behavior on the part of the Russians similar to those of last year, such as significant military exercises. He noted talk in the media about "unfinished business," and said that Russia would only understand clear and explicit messages about its activities. He professed a lack of understanding in the decision making process inside Russia, with considerable room for misunderstanding, and said those clear messages were therefore critical to ensure Russia did not undertake anything rash.

¶3. (C) Sikharulidze also outlined Georgia's defense priorities, which involve restructuring the military while maintaining readiness in the face of the Russian threat. The restructuring effort focuses on personnel management, resource management, training, and doctrine development, combined with improvements in command-and-control, anti-tank and air defense capabilities. The August war taught Georgia a number of lessons, including the need for better command-and-control and intelligence analysis. At the same time, Sikharulidze said that the Ministry faced an additional seven percent reduction in its budget, and the military was

planning a gradual reduction in its forces, down to an authorized force level of less than 31,000 troops. (Note: The following day, post learned that the Minister revised this figure downward even further, to less than 30,000. End note.) He explained that the government had not yet made this information public, because it did not want the decision to be interpreted the wrong way politically. A/S Gordon Qto be interpreted the wrong way politically. A/S Gordon acknowledged that, while there is clearly no military solution to the current conflicts, every country has the right to self-defense. He welcomed Georgia's willingness to contribute to the effort in Afghanistan, which is a priority for President Obama, and noted the involvement would be good for bilateral cooperation in general.

NATO AND BILATERAL COOPERATION

¶4. (C) A/S Gordon said that Georgia's NATO aspirations are in a pretty good place, with the NATO-Georgia Council in place and Annual National Plan on track. Sikharulidze acknowledged that different paths were in principle possible to accede to NATO, but suggested it would be helpful for all allies to be in consensus on this point; he noted that France and Germany seemed still to believe that a Membership Action Plan was required. Although Gordon admitted that there was still work to do among the allies in reaching a common understanding on Georgia's path to membership, he reaffirmed that Georgia would join when three conditions were met: when Georgia was ready, when Georgia had something to offer the alliance, and when there is a consensus among members states that the time was right.

¶5. (C) The Minister expressed interest in enhanced

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cooperation with NATO allies on a bilateral basis, explaining that NATO itself can help on certain technical elements, but direct bilateral engagement is crucial. He said that in general bilateral relationships were in good shape, although in one case -- the Netherlands -- programs had ended after the August war. Noting that Georgia is cooperating with France to send Georgian forces with a French unit to Afghanistan, Sikharulidze said Georgia might approach the U.S. for assistance with transportation. Most importantly, however, Sikharulidze said that all other partners look to the United States as a trendsetter. He explained that the Russian factor plays a tremendous role, with countries not wanting to jeopardize their relationship with Russia; he said the Dutch even admitted that their decision to halt programs stemmed in large part from this concern. A/S Gordon noted that only a few countries had backed out of the recent PfP exercises. Sikharulidze confirmed this and pointed out that another exercise was planned for the fall of 2009; he hoped such exercises would become routine. Gordon said the United States remained committed to the fall exercise, which would be oriented toward the Afghanistan mission. Sikharulidze added he would also like to see exercises dedicated to homeland defense, which is the main function of the Ministry, and reiterated that the United States would once again set the trend for such cooperation.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador noted that the United States has been actively involved in assisting the Georgian military in its training efforts, including in particular accepting several Georgian students for a full course of study at the service academies. A/S Gordon asked how else the U.S. could help, and the Minister explained that any assistance on the academic side would be useful. Georgia would focus on the infrastructure necessary to improve training, such as buildings, but help in such areas as curriculum development would be welcome. The Ambassador noted that additional IMET funds could help in this regard.

POLITICAL ISSUES

¶7. (C) Regarding the Geneva process, Sikharulidze explained

that, although it has not yet produced any serious results, it offers a better format for talks than any that previously existed, because it makes clear that Russia is a party to the conflict. He suggested that the process deserves some more time, although there may eventually come a point when it no longer makes sense to continue. He noted that Russia is trying to undermine the format by elevating the breakaway territories to an equal footing with the full participants, but would probably like to put an end to the process. Regarding UNOMIG, Sikharulidze admitted that the mission is important, but described it as weak. He said it would not be worth sacrificing the principle of territorial integrity for the sake of keeping it.

18. (U) A/S Gordon did not have an opportunity to clear this cable before he departed Tbilisi.

TEFFT